

The Bethel Pulpit – Pastor Scot Sorensen

January 8, 2012 – Baptism of our Lord

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text – Mark 1:4-11

SERMON- “ Dragon’s Tale”

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. His parents called him Eustace Clarence, and his teachers called him Scrubb. I can't tell you how his friends spoke to him, for he had none.”

With these words C.S.Lewis begins his Narnia book *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. How his adventure began with Edmund and Lucy aboard the great ship Dawn Treader, I haven't got time to explain. Suffice it to say that Eustace Clarence Scrubb found himself in the midst of a great adventure, traveling to places he never imagined, and all the time he was dreadfully awful to everyone.

Upon landing at a supposed deserted island, Eustace went off exploring -- he did not go off looking for food and fresh water to restock the ship as he was instructed. Instead he wandered off trying to get away from everyone for a while. One thing led to another, and he found himself in a valley with a frightfully steep path to get out, it was there that he saw, for the first time in his life, a real live dragon. Live is not fully correct. It was a dying dragon that Eustace saw. In fact, it died right in front of him, nearly scaring him to death.

As Eustace was attempting the steep climb out of the valley, after witnessing the death of a dragon, a horrible rainstorm began and Eustace ran for cover. He spotted a cave out of which the dying dragon had come, and since that was the only shelter around, he bolted for the protection of the dragon's cave.

Most of us know what we should expect to find in a dragon's lair, but Eustace was from an odd family and had read all the wrong books. Everything he read had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and so on, but they were weak on dragons. That was why he was so puzzled at the surface on which he walked upon entering the dark cave. Parts of the floor were too prickly to be stones and too hard to be thorns. And there seemed to be a great many round, flat things, and it all clinked when he moved.

When Eustace's eyes adjusted to the dim light, you know what he found. A dragon's treasure. The prickly things were crowns, and all around him were jewels, coins, rings, bracelets, cups, gems. He was rich. Wildly, unimaginably wealthy. The problem was how to get all this stuff back on board the ship. More importantly, how could he get it all back on board without letting anyone else know?

Knowing he couldn't haul off all the coins by himself, Eustace concentrated on smaller, easier to carry items. This bracelet for starters, he thought to himself. I bet all those jewels are diamonds. I'll slip it on my own wrist. Too big. But not if I push it right up here above my elbow. Then fill my pockets with diamonds. That's lighter than gold.

The rain was not letting up, and after such a horrible fright from seeing the dragon, the long walk in the mountains, and the sudden storm, Eustace was suddenly very tired, laid down and fell asleep upon the treasure.

As the story progresses, Eustace turned into a dragon while he was asleep, which is itself another tale, that we do not have time for this morning. But it seems that sleeping on a dragon's hoard, with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he become a dragon himself.

After six days of being a dragon, and becoming more miserable with each passing day, Eustace found himself lying awake and wondering what on earth would become of him.

Then he looked up and saw the very last thing he expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards him. And one odd thing was that there was no moonlight that night, but there was light where the lion walked. It came nearer and nearer. Eustace was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, he could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn't that kind of fear. He wasn't afraid of the lion eating him, he was just afraid of it – if you can understand. Well, the lion came up closer and looked square into the dragon's eyes. Eustace closed his eyes tight, not wanting to look back. But that wasn't any good, because the lion said to him, "Follow me."

Eustace, (the dragon), felt like he had to obey, so he got up and followed. The lion led him a long way into the mountains. And there was this moonlight over and round the lion wherever they went. At last they came to the top of the mountain and there was a garden; trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of the garden was a well.

Eustace knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells – like a very big round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water looked so inviting and Eustace knew that if he could only get in there and bathe it would ease the tremendous pain in his front leg, (due to the bracelet) but the lion told him that he must undress first before entering the water.

The dragon was ready to say that he couldn't undress because he hadn't any clothes on when suddenly Eustace realized that dragons are snaky sort of things and that snakes can cast off their skins. Of course, he thought, that's what the lion means. So he started scratching and the scales began coming off all over the place. Then he scratched a little deeper and, instead of scales, his whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like he was a banana. In a minute or two he just stepped out of it. It was the most lovely feeling to be out of that dragon skin. So he started to go down into the well for his bath.

Just as he was ready to put his dragon foot into the water he looked down at his reflection and saw that his skin was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had

been before. Oh, that's all right, he said to himself, it only means he had another smaller suit on underneath the first one. So he scratched and tore again and this under-skin peeled off beautifully, and out he stepped and left the second skin lying beside the other one as he went down to the well for his bath.

Well, exactly the same thing happened again. A third time he scratched another under-skin off, peeled it off and stepped out of it. But as soon as he looked at himself in the water he knew this attempt was just as futile as the previous two. He began to wonder if he would ever be able to peel off all of his dragon skin.

Then the lion said, "You will have to let me undress you."

Now Eustace, even though he was a dragon, was frightfully afraid of those lion claws. But he was desperate, he saw the three dragon-skins lying by the pool, and knew he could never get into the pool without the lion's help. So the mighty dragon just laid flat on his back to let the lion undress him.

The very first tear the lion made was so deep that Eustace thought it had gone right into his heart. And when the lion began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything he had ever felt. The lion peeled the skin right off, just as Eustace had thought he had done the other three times, only, only when Eustace had done it himself, it had never hurt.

There it was, lying on the grass, so much thicker and darker and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there Eustace was, as smooth and soft as a peeled switch. The lion caught hold of him in his paws – which smarted quite a bit seeing how tender he now was – and threw him into the water. It smarted like anything, but only for a moment. Eustace started swimming and splashing and he found that the pain had gone from his arm – because he had turned into a boy again.

It would be nice, and nearly true, to say that from that time forth Eustace was a different boy. To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. But the cure had begun.

This is Baptism of our Lord Sunday, a day we remember not only the story of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, and the sound from heaven that bellowed, "You are my own dear son. And I am pleased with you," but we also take time to think of our own baptism.

As Martin Luther said nearly 500 years ago, a Christian can spend their whole life contemplating the wonders and mysteries of baptism and never complete their study. So today I narrow our focus to this: Every Baptized Christian can receive the blessings of baptism by accepting the DIFFERENCES between our work and God's work. That is, we need to remain clear about what we do in baptism, and what God does.

The story about Eustace Clarence Scrubb comes from C.S. Lewis' children's tale, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, from the Chronicles of Narnia. It is one of my favorite accounts of what happens in baptism. Now, the image of us as dragons is not a pleasant one, but the metaphor works.

Apart from God, indeed we have reptilian behaviors. And the other part of the story that I particularly like, is the basic reminder, that we cannot do it, we can't make ourselves ready for baptism by ourselves. In fact, we can't help all that much.

Baptism is God's work. Ripping open our hearts so that a new creature, with a new heart can be born. That is what God is up to in these baptismal waters. Whenever we try it ourselves, that is, preparing ourselves for God, thinking we are putting ourselves into a right relationship with the Creator of the Universe, it is like Eustace trying to peel off his dragon skin. Our efforts are always superficial, it does not last, and it does not hurt. Quite the contrary, when God claims us in Baptism, a new creation is formed, and it hurts. Anyone who tells you that there is no pain and hurt and heartache in the Christian life is a liar. It hurts to be a Christian when your faith tells you that the popular option is not the right option: saying NO to racist and sexist jokes that demean others while all of your friends are laughing ; choosing an economic lifestyle that is friendly to God's creation rather than taking whatever you can assuming you deserve it; speaking out for peace and justice when war sabers rattle.

There will be times when following the One who calls us through these waters of baptism, when walking that wet path will be difficult, and unpopular, and it may cost us friends. Jesus even said it will often divide families, and it will be painful.

BUT there is also no life without death, and we never can know the heights of pure joy, unless we have also known something of the depth's of the valley.

The promises of God, which we are invited to receive are spoken clearly in Isaiah:

"But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you, O Jacob
he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name and you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...
For I Am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel your Savior... .

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored,
I love you. . .

Do not fear, for I am with you

In baptism we are a New Creation - what's new? It's all new. Forgiveness, possibilities, imagination, dreams, love, hope. Each and every day we are invited to splash in the waters of our Baptism – and THAT is being a New Creation.

Receive the blessings of God. Remember that it is not our work in baptism, but God who peels away the old Adam and creates a new creature; loved by God, created and formed by God, precious in God's sight, called by name.

Come on in, the water's fine.

Amen. © 2012